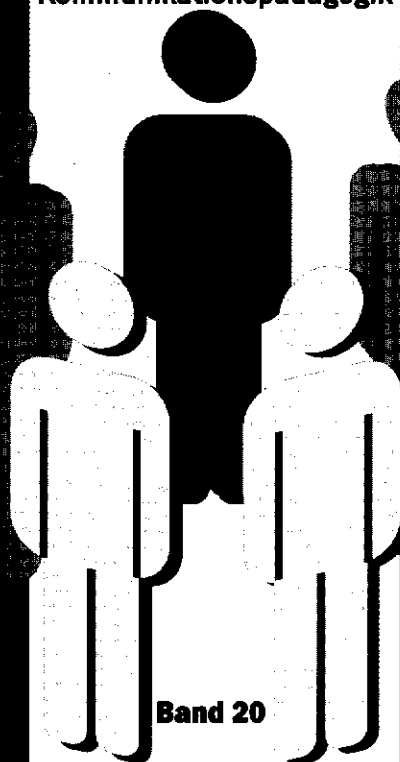


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# Communication and Political Change

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## American Roman Catholic Journalist Dorothy Day: Agent for Social and Political Change

The devout Roman Catholic American journalist Dorothy Day (1897-1980) spent more than six decades of her life actively protesting and resisting the social and political structures of society which depersonalized and dehumanized the ordinary American worker. She lived and wrote as an urban social activist – a woman who loved the city and its poor, marginalized people. In her paradoxical personality, Dorothy Day exemplified both the contemplative and the active life. Daily devoting herself to a life of deep prayer, like her Cistercian monastic friend, the mystic Thomas Merton, she also picketed, paraded, marched, staged nonviolent protest actions, and was arrested many times (her first arrest was for advocating the rights of women). While she was a true revolutionary, a radical thinker, a social innovator who challenged the American social system for over sixty years, Day was thoroughly American, and, in spite of what many thought otherwise, always a loyal citizen. Her actions and her ideas, sometimes spoken with fury but with an underlying compassion for the outcast, called America to examine the nation's treatment of its social underclass.

As a young woman in college, she became keenly interested in social change and soon declared herself a socialist. With other friends, she joined demonstrations to protest the working conditions of mass production. Agonizing over the plight of the Depression poor in the early 1930s, Day

struggled to find a way to direct her energies and her moral principles for the downtrodden. Her answer came in meeting Peter Maurin, a Catholic Frenchman, who held similar socialist principles. While she had read social-justice advocates Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov, her new friend Maurin introduced her to the writings of other great thinkers: Maurizc, Maritain, Gildon, Peguy, and, especially, the encyclicals of the popes. Mark and Louise Zwick (1998) of the Houston, Texas, Catholic Worker write that it was Peter Maurin who brought the social encyclicals to Dorothy. He also brought her his understanding of Church history, the prophets of Israel, the Fathers of the Church, the Thomistic doctrine of the common good and the Sermon on the Mount, whose sayings he called the "shock maxims" of the Gospel. It was Maurin who brought the idea of a newspaper to popularize his ideas, his program of action of round-table discussions, houses of hospitality and agronomic universities, the new synthesis he wanted to make, as St. Thomas had in the Middle Ages (Zwick 1998).

Together, they would synthesize various socialist ideas into something new to challenge traditional Roman Catholic thinking about "charity" for the poor. Rejecting the extremes of both communism and capitalism, they envisioned a society composed of small groups of people living as the early Christians did, as Paul tells us in the Christian Scriptures' Acts of the Apostles: the people held all goods in common, shared according to needs, lived simply, and ministered with compassion to one another (See Acts 2: 42-6). Peter Maurin called for Agronomic Universities to be established throughout America where people would learn about simple and economical means of producing food and would learn about more compassionate means for developing a just social order. (This particular dream of Maurin's has never really been fulfilled.) With Peter Maurin's keen intellect and with Dorothy Day's impassioned journalist's spirit, their

ideas for social change coalesced. On May 1, 1933, the Catholic Worker Movement began with the distribution of the first issue of *The Catholic Worker*, an eight-page paper, which sold for a penny a copy (and still sells for a penny today, six decades later). The little tabloid was ready for distribution for the annual May Day Communist rally held at Union Square in New York City, on the Lower East Side at 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

As Eileen Egan (1983) says in *Dorothy Day and the Permanent Revolution*, "Dorothy's burning love for the poor and the voiceless lights up every page. With a searing, a compassionate pen she describes the exploitation of black labor in Mississippi by the U.S. War Department and the oppression of women in sweat shops and factories" (4). The little paper's title, *The Catholic Worker*, echoed the Communists' paper, *The Daily Worker*. A short editorial announced another, alternative way of viewing life and humanity's social problems:

For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight. For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain. For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight – this little paper is addressed. It is printed to call their attention to the fact that the Catholic Church has a social program – to let them know that there are [people] of God who are working not only for their spiritual, but for their material welfare (*The Catholic Worker*, May 1, 1933).

The Catholic Worker Movement, with the clarion voice, announced its beginnings.

Laypeople, a few religious, and a few priests began to accept and promulgate Maurin's and Day's ideas; the newspaper, always a monthly, with a column by Dorothy, began to plant the seeds of a new kind of social revolution. Not all American Catholics, they were soon to discover, were tied to the party line of big corporate business, excessive usury, economic

exploitation of the workers, anti-Semitism, and warmongering. Philosophical, financial, and physical help began to materialize for their new venture. And they started their next practical phase of The Catholic Worker Movement: they opened a House of Hospitality. The idea was a simple, biblical one taken directly from the ancient Hebrew prophets, from Jesus' words in the Gospels, and from the Pauline Epistles – each and all promoting a "preferential option" for the poor. Day wrote, "Within The Catholic Worker there has always been such emphasis placed on the works of mercy, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the harborless... [Jesus'] love was always shown most tenderly to the poor, the derelict, the prodigal son, so that he would leave the ninety-nine just ones to go after the one" (The Catholic Worker, February 1959).

People donated money, food, clothes, and their time – and thus the neglected ones were given clothes, served soup and bread, listened to, and, as space became available, they were given a place to sleep. Alcoholics, the homeless, women victimized by husbands, the derelict – all were taken in, even when they were filthy and abusive themselves. The Houses of Hospitality spread from New York's Lower East Side – where Day herself chose to live the rest of her life in a state of voluntary poverty – to other cities from coast to coast. When Day was asked once how close she was to the workers, the poor, the marginalized, the expendable people, she said:

Going around and seeing such sights is not enough. To help the organizers, to give what you have for relief, to pledge yourself to voluntary poverty for life so that you can share with your brothers is not enough. One must live with them, share with them their sufferings too.

Give up one's privacy, and mental and spiritual comforts as well as physical... Yes, we have lived with the poor, with the workers, and we know them not just from the streets, or in mass meetings, but from years of living with them in the slums, in the tenements, in our hospices, in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Toledo, St. Louis,

Seattle, Los Angeles... We have lived with the unemployed, the sick, the unemployables.

Going to the people is the purest and best act in Christian tradition and is the beginning of world brotherhood (Quoted in Daniel Berrigan, S. J. 1981, xxii-xxiii).

Here she vividly, poignantly illustrates how the Works of Mercy towards society's down-trodden are most pragmatically made evident in the Houses of Hospitality.

Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day felt passionately that human beings need to sense personal responsibility for their brothers and sisters. They argued that no government program, state welfare system, or charitable organization should do the job of helping the poor. Rather, individuals working communally, in a spirit of compassion and charity, will best do the job. Day carefully explained:

No one asked us to do this work. The mayor of the city did not come along and ask us to run a bread line or a hospice to supplement the municipal lodging house. Nor did the Bishop or Cardinal ask that we help out the Catholic Charities in their endeavor to help the poor. No one asked us to start an agency or an institution of any kind. On our own responsibility, because we are our brother's keeper, because of a sense of personal responsibility, we began to try to seek Christ in each one that came to us. If a man came in hungry, there was always something in the ice box. If he needed a bed, and we were crowded, there was always a quarter around to buy a bed on the Bowery. If he needed clothes, there were our friends to be appealed to, after we had taken the extra coat out of the closet first, of course (The Catholic Worker, September 1942).

She was adamant that the Catholic Worker Movement was not a charitable organization. Even today the movement does not have a tax-exempt status with the U.S. Government. The Works of Mercy, she insisted, were to be charity of the heart, for persons, never for personal profit.

While the Houses of Hospitality proved no real threat to the Catholic hierarchy and to the larger secular society, Day's stance on other social

issues brought her into the realm of serious controversy, especially her anti-war beliefs and actions. When the Spanish Civil War caused American Catholics to support Franco and to oppose the anti-Church stance of the Communist-inspired Loyalists, Day and *The Catholic Worker* called for neutrality. The little paper took both Franco and the loyalists to task for brutal killings. The *Catholic Worker* then had its first test of loyalty: a peak circulation of 150,000 quickly fell to 75,000. Day, knowing for much of her life how to take a strong position and say No!, stood firm, putting the consciences of many of her readers to a difficult test. An even more decisive test of conscience soon followed with the outbreak of hostilities leading to World War II. The *Catholic Worker* stood boldly for pacifism in the presence of America's national mania for war. She proclaimed publicly and succinctly in their newspaper in January 1941:

[T]he position of *The Catholic Worker* remains the same. We are Christian pacifists and try to follow the counsels of perfection... We firmly believe that our stand makes for the common good... We may suffer for this faith, but we firmly believe that this suffering will be more fruitful than any words of ours (*The Catholic Worker*).

Later in 1941 she declared more specifically her moral stance:

We say frankly that we wish indeed that the workers would lay down their tools and refuse to make the instruments of death. We wish that they were so convinced of the immorality of modern wars that they would refuse to make the instruments of those wars (*The Catholic Worker*, April 1941).

Day (1970, 53) in her provocative essay "On Pilgrimage" reiterated her absolutist moral position against the use of force:

All our talk about peace and the weapons of the Spirit are meaningless unless we try in every way to embrace voluntary poverty and not to work in any position, any job, that contributes to war, not to take any job whose pay comes from the fear of war, of the atom bomb. We must give up our place in this world, sacrifice children, family, wife, mother, and embrace poverty, and then we will be laying down life itself.

Day constantly, quietly, modestly insisted that the simple, stark words of the Christian Scriptures are to be taken for what they say: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (See Matthew 5: 38-48 and Luke 6: 27-36). Again she affirmed,

Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5-7], which means that we will try to be peacemakers. Speaking for many of our conscientious objectors, we will not participate in armed warfare or by making munitions, or by buying government bonds to further the war effort or in urging others to these efforts (The Catholic Worker, January 1942).

Eileen Egan (1983), a Catholic Worker herself, says that Day's "bold stance was followed by bold action" (12). A conscientious objector accompanied Day to Washington, D.C., where they testified before a Congressional Committee on behalf of alternative civilian service for lay Catholics who objected to serving in World War II and who, on grounds of conscience, refused to kill. Hers was a rare voice advocating nonviolence, and she infuriated many Catholics – laypeople, priests, bishops. She told a long-time friend of hers, Robert Coles (1987), a Harvard professor of psychiatry, what she knew very well:

Cardinal Spellman didn't like The Worker politics. He wasn't the only one. Lots of Catholics were angry with us when we refused to call Franco a great defender of Western Christian civilization. Lots of Catholics were angry with us when we maintained our pacifism with agony during the Second World War. Lots of Catholics were angry with us when we weren't running to build bomb shelters in the 1950s, when we protested the madness of bomb shelters in a nuclear age, the madness of war in any age (83).

In this straightforward directness and clarity of Day's stance, Coles notes that "...she had a Gandhi-like simplicity about her [...] but as in Gandhi, a tough, shrewd, knowing political sensibility was also at work" (85).

Another prophetic Catholic voice, Daniel Berrigan, S. J. (1981), speaks clearly about Day's powerful influence on his own anti-war actions:



When William Miller's history of the Catholic Worker Movement was published, I had just come out of prison during the Vietnam years. I stayed up all night unable to put the book aside. What held me in thrall was an absolutely stunning consistency. No to all killing, invasions, incursions, excusing causes, call of the blood, summons to the bloody flag, caustic body counts, just wars, necessary wars, religious wars, needful wars, holy wars. Into the fury of the murderous crosswinds went her simple word: No ... It was the power of that single monosyllable, turning her away from every enticement to compromise, to come to terms, to make it big, to institutionalize, to play god, to cotton up to the moneyed and the powerful (xix-xx).

Writing in 1981 as a Plowshares Defendant, "one of eight Christians indicted, jailed, tried, and convicted for having destroyed, in September 1980, in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, two nuclear warheads," Berrigan (1981, xxiii) declares that "it was the first nuclear disarmament [...] in thirty-five years." He salutes her moral convictions:

Without Dorothy, without that exemplary patience, courage, moral modesty, without this woman pounding at the locked door behind which the powerful mock the powerless with games of triage, without her, the resistance we offered would have been simply unthinkable. She urged our consciences off the beaten track; she made the impossible (in our case) probable, and then actual. She did this, first of all, by living as though the truth were true.

In all her activities dealing with poverty, worker rights, and the mechanisms of war, Dorothy Day struggled to find wholeness in both her faith and intellect. Her granddaughter, Martha Hennessy (2002), speaking about her grandmother's attitudes on war, aptly sums up Dorothy Day's ability to achieve coherence in her life: "Dorothy created an example for us in which she integrated political, theological, moral, and social ideals into

an effective and powerful model." As she evolved in her "personalist" philosophy, she became "larger than life because she could galvanize others to act, and she still does" (2).

Her good friend, Robert Coles (1987), has written that in all her struggles to change the social order, she was always working to balance her own needs for both personal quietness and community. "Though she had both a contemplative and prophetic mind, her life was an active, essentially pastoral one: feed the hungry, house the needy, care for the sick. She was an earthy, political, practical-minded person, yet she could be almost willfully blind to the world's habits and priorities as she persisted in the direction of her faith" (159). She could balance the roles of being a war protester and of being the woman of prayer, picketing on the streets and faithfully attending the daily Mass at church.

Robert Coles (1987), in reflecting on the "central matter of moral inquiry" for us human beings, asks a simple but profound question: "How should we try to live this life?" (xxi). For Dorothy Day, Coles concludes, her daily efforts were "directed at people's attitudes, at their moral lives, at their overall ethical purpose as human beings. She wanted to affect not just the overall problem, but people's everyday lives – their manner of living with one another" (96). Living with one another in the ordinariness of the everyday becomes for Dorothy Day the arena of creating change. She says:

What we would like to do is change the world--make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And to a certain extent, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute – we to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world (Catholic Social Justice and Philosophy Website).

The prophetic voice of this pragmatic twentieth-century Catholic journalist continues to speak to us eloquently, simply, with deep personal

integrity: doing the Works of Mercy and disarming the human heart will change the interior landscape of our personal lives and reshape our corporate lives, thus fostering radical social and political change.

Note: This essay is an upgraded and revised version of an earlier project.

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